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THE REPUBLIC AND DIPLOMACY IN FRANCE.

BY ALCIDE EBRAÏ, FORMERLY FRENCH CONSUL-GENERAL AT
NEW YORK.

It is always a delicate matter to write in a foreign periodical on the politics of one's own country; for if you praise your readers are apt to set you down as a braggart or a chauvinist, while if you criticise you run the risk of shocking the susceptibilities of foreigners as well as those of your own countrymen. I admit that in the present instance I should experience some embarrassment if what I am going to say here were to appear anywhere else than in an American periodical. Quite a long experience as a writer on diplomatic questions, supplemented by a short service under the French Foreign Office, has led me to the conviction, especially since the French - German crisis of 1905-06, that the political institutions of France—that is to say, republican institutions as they are understood and practised in that country—lend themselves badly to the carrying on of the foreign policy of a great power. It will be readily understood, therefore, that it is easier for me to explain this to foreign republicans than to any other class of foreigners, and my position will be still better understood when I state—and here I solicit the indulgence of Americans—that a sojourn in the United States has largely contributed to the forming of this conviction concerning the republic and diplomacy in France. Having learned to know that Americans are sensible and not eager for vain flattery, I feel sure at the outset that I shall not displease them if I point out that their democracy is not exempt, as is sometimes supposed in France, from the imperfections which also mar French democracy. This, it seems to me, is especially the case in what concerns home politics, so that I think Gallia and Columbia, admitting sisterhood even in their shortcomings, might

say of one another, slightly modifying the verse of the Latin poet, "*Non ignara mali, miseræ miserere disco.*"

I am also of the opinion that it will be to the benefit of both Gallia and Columbia to show themselves to one another just as they really are.

I shall now explain as succinctly and as clearly as possible what might be called "the incompatibilities" between the maintenance of the exterior situation of France considered as a great world power and the manner in which republican government is understood and practised by the French people.

Let me first speak of the religious policy of the French Republic, especially as regards its effects abroad. If I had not lived in the United States I might find some little embarrassment in doing this, for I should hold concerning the religious situation in America the erroneous idea often held in Europe—viz., that the United States is essentially, exclusively and jealously Protestant, carrying its attachment to the Reformation to such a point as to be intolerant towards all other sects. But I found a very different America from this, an America having a very strong Catholic minority and treating this minority with a large spirit of tolerance. In fact, I remarked that the anti-Catholic policy of France was not always approved on the other side of the Atlantic even by American Protestants, which is another reason why I can speak more freely thereon to my present readers.

There can no longer be any doubt to-day that there exists in France an irreparable rupture, a complete divorce, between the Republic and Catholicism. At the start this was not so sure, and it was permissible to ask if there was not simply a misunderstanding between Church and State. The Church had taken up a position in opposition to the Republic, but it had done so, it said, only in self-defence, holding that the past plainly showed that the Church could expect only enmity from the republican *régime*, while the Republic, on its side, seemed disposed even as early as 1870 to declare war on the Church, pretending also that it acted on the defensive. So when Leo XIII announced his policy of honestly accepting the republican idea in his relations with France, hoping thus to reconcile the Republic and the Church, he soon perceived that this was a vain dream and that there really existed in France an irreconcilable antinomy between the two powers. Then came the diplomatic rupture between the

Holy See and the Republic which consummated the official divorce; and from that moment the attitude of the Republic towards Rome has been an open desire to extinguish Catholicism in France in the interests of free thought and materialism, and not with any wish to advance another religious creed.

This last point should be borne in mind, for it is important. In Protestant circles in France and even among some Catholics separated from their Church, and also abroad in Protestant countries, especially in England and Switzerland, the idea prevailed for a time that the French crisis would have as a result the substituting of Protestantism for Catholicism. But almost everywhere this is now recognized as a mistake. In certain clear-sighted Protestant quarters it is even perceived that a free-thinking and totally materialistic France is a danger which a Catholic France did not present.

From an international point of view—the only one that interests us here—this unfortunate religious policy has had this consequence: France has lost in the Catholic world the influence and the prestige which she so long enjoyed there as being the first Catholic power, and has gained no compensating advantage, such, for example, as the sympathy of the Protestant countries. The position which France formerly held in the Catholic world has been assumed either by some other Catholic power like Italy or Austria or by powers which are mainly Protestant, such as Germany, England or even the United States, countries which have adopted in religious matters an eclectic, tolerant course.

As I am addressing myself to American readers I shall limit myself in this connection to certain facts, the full meaning of which they are in a position to grasp easily. Thus, just as it is plain that the religious policy of the French Republic has drawn Alsace-Lorraine nearer to Germany so it has had a tendency to reconcile more and more French Canada to English rule. In the United States it has had the effect of alienating from France all those Catholic elements dominated by Irish influences which were formerly friendly but are now hostile to France. In Latin America, France has also lost ground in so far as that part of the world is still attached to Catholicism. It is not necessary for me to point out who has gained in those parts by the diminishing of French prestige. Americans are too observant and too well placed not to see it for themselves.

One of the natural results of this French hostility towards Catholicism is the placing of the nation in an unfriendly attitude towards Latinism, for the dominant French republicanism sees a firm link between Latinism and Romanism, so that in order to free itself completely from the latter it is beginning to show a tendency to proscribe the former. Up to the present France has always been the centre, the rallying-point of the Latin world; but now, just as she loses her Catholic primacy, so she finds slipping from her this Latin primacy, which is passing over to Italy, already possessed of strong historic reasons for playing this rôle.

It might be hoped that, under such circumstances, those who are spreading French thought would take especial care to maintain intact the prestige of French influence as against rival influences. But on account of a strange conception of liberty as they imagine it must necessarily spring from republican institutions, they often do just the contrary of what they should do. There is no objection in pointing out to foreigners this weakness, for though by so doing we may be putting a small number of Frenchmen in a bad light, we are serving France herself. It is only too true that many French writers defame France in foreign lands; and as one generally has no interest in defaming oneself, it is not astonishing that the outside world believes what these Frenchmen say. Unfortunately these shortcomings are not due to mere individual faults. If we leave out of the consideration mere speculators in pornographic literature who exist in all countries, we are nevertheless obliged to admit that many writers are sincere in their belief that there is a natural relation between the republican *régime* and a literature that produces a scandal abroad. For preceding *régimes* having often oppressed literature, the contrary *régime* should, logically, emancipate it to the point of unbounded license, even if the good name of France abroad should suffer in consequence.

To these causes of weakness in moral and intellectual France, which spring from the manner in which the republican form of government is practised there, should be added not less depressing ones of a political and administrative order, which we perceive by examining the manner in which is understood from the republican point of view the defence of the exterior interests of the country and how are set to work the measures destined for this defence.

The difficulties that have been encountered and, in fact, are still encountered in keeping French diplomacy in line with the real needs of the country show how impossible it is in France to conciliate a rational diplomacy with republican institutions. Public opinion, which, under this *régime*, is absolute mistress of home affairs, is also sufficiently powerful in foreign affairs to prevent anything being done of which it does not approve. This public opinion is all the more a determinative factor in French politics because the elements which direct it are kept in the background and are unstable. Then the French President presides but does not govern, which is just the contrary of what happens in the United States, so we cannot expect from that quarter any initiative or act that might give stability or continuity to our diplomacy. The ministers change frequently, and it is not necessary to go very far back in the history of French diplomacy to discover that its course may be totally modified by the politician whom a crisis in home politics places in the Palace on the Quai d'Orsay. With this instability prevailing at the top, it is but natural that public opinion, the logical master in a democracy, should practically become also the governing element even in our diplomacy. But unfortunately French public opinion is not, as a rule, very clear-sighted in diplomatic matters, so that we arrive at this inevitable conclusion—the political *régime* which adopts the republican system is, in so far as this happens, inept to safeguard the foreign interests of France.

I hasten to add that this diplomatic ineptitude of French public opinion is to be attributed to causes which, from a moral and philosophical point of view, one is tempted to congratulate the country on; the French people have never been selfish, though it is generally held that a nation has the right to be so and duty sometimes even demands that it be so. Frenchmen are too apt to sacrifice tangible and practical interests either to altruistic impulses or to political preferences which are really contrary to the true interests of our diplomacy. How often in the past has France sacrificed herself for the well-being of other nations, and to-day she is abandoning sound diplomatic principles in order to attain a political and religious ideal. This mental state of the French nation is the greatest obstacle in the way of the normal advance of our diplomacy. For instance, it is next to impossible to make the French public understand that we should

seek as allies and friends those who have interests in common with us, rather than those whose political institutions and moral and religious conditions win our admiration. The attitude of political parties and public opinion during recent years have clearly revealed this state of the French mind. It is perfectly evident, however, that for a long time still France should provide against the possible hostility of Germany. What has happened during the past few years must convince even the most optimistic-minded that this is a primordial necessity. We should, therefore, be not only the ally of Russia, but we should also keep up the friendliest relations possible with the Powers, which, under certain circumstances, might become the auxiliaries of Germany, England, Italy and Spain. Yet you will see political parties in France deliberately thwarting this vital diplomatic policy, first in one direction and then in another, and for reasons which have nothing to do with our foreign relations. This very Russian alliance, which is the keystone of our diplomacy, has not escaped the attacks of these persons. All "the advanced" circles of France are hostile to Russia and, consequently, to the Russian alliance, and this simply because they look upon Russia as "an autocratic" country. In 1901 the present Prime Minister of France, M. Briand, spoke in a public meeting against the Tsar's visit to Paris and declared that France "dishonored herself" by being the ally of Russia. During the Russo-Japanese war a most extraordinary state of mind was revealed in some quarters of France where one saw many Frenchmen, for reasons of "liberalism," praying for the defeat of Russia, which defeat brought us to the humiliation of Algeciras! These same "advanced" people do not like Spain because it is a "reactionary" country; they approve of a good understanding with England because this is a nation of a liberal type, and they are friendly with Italy because the Quirinal appears to them to be the foe of the Vatican. They are even dreaming of substituting for the Franco-Russian alliance a triple Anglo-Franco-Italian one. In the French conservative camp you find the same incoherence, but in the opposite direction; their hostility towards England, liberal and Protestant, almost causes them to turn towards Germany, while they hate Italy even more than they do England. Thus, outside of a very narrow circle of professional diplomats and thoughtful individuals nobody seems to be governed by the real interests of

France herself; whence the difficulty which these professionals and thoughtful persons find in accomplishing something useful in the midst of these incoherent surroundings, especially as no leader stands forth who can act as arbiter. For the moment this diplomatic anarchy seems to be giving place to a little more order. But this is probably only due to the scare produced by the recent threatening attitude of Germany; we shall doubtless fall back.

I come now to the principal reason why the republican *régime* in France is paralyzed when it has to do with the exterior interests of the country. It has come to be an axiom in the French political and Parliamentary world that a war, whether lucky or unlucky for France, would be almost sure to end the Republic. If France won the successful general would sacrifice the Republic to his personal ambition; if the opposite happened, then popular discontent would overturn the present constitution. Gambetta himself has said that the Third Republic's arch enemy is "a Continental armed conflict." My own opinion is that a victorious war would alone be dangerous to the existing *régime*. But I repeat that the prevailing opinion in France is to-day that a war, whatever should be its result, would be fatal to the Republic. It follows, therefore, as an inevitable consequence, that the present *régime* will so conduct itself not only as to prevent the advent of any international complication, even if it should have to yield when it really should stand firm; but should any such complication arise, in spite of the Government's conciliatory efforts, it will go farther and make all the concessions humanly possible and would have recourse to war only when placed in such a position that no other course were possible. Among the most pronounced republicans no one any longer questions the fact that this is the real explanation of the systematic effacement of France in international matters, of her complete abandonment, which is now certain, of the old longing to get Alsace-Lorraine back again, and of the numerous other examples of governmental weaknesses. It is even probable that the Casa Blanca incident in the autumn of 1908 would have been another back-down if the head of the Government at that moment, M. Clémenteau, were not a man of energy and combativeness, who both disliked yielding to Germany and who felt himself more capable than any other leader of protecting the Republic from any of the dangers which might arise from a war.

To these causes of feebleness, which reflection shows are inherent in the republican form of government as it is understood in France, are others which I wish I could feel were accidental but from which the *régime* does not seem to be able to free itself. I refer to the lack of military preparedness, which, notwithstanding the enormous money sacrifice which the nation makes, is revealed every time the army or navy is needed to meet any foreign difficulty. At the moment of the Fashoda affair we had to give way because the navy was not ready, and at the moment of the Morocco imbroglio it was the army which was lacking. These mishaps and causes for alarm have as a natural result the strengthening of the weak points, but only when it is too late to do any good; and then the administration of the War and Navy Departments soon falls back into the old errors. This was seen in the recent inquiry into the state of the navy ordered by Parliament, when it was discovered that the fleets of France are in as lamentable a state as they were at the time of the Fashoda rebuff and that in case of another sudden danger we would be in the same helpless condition as before. As the normal state of the Government is one of hesitancy lest the *régime* should be endangered, an only too ready ear is lent to the experts who announce that the army or navy, or it may be both, is not prepared to meet the impending attack. But why is it that they are never ready except when it is too late? Everybody is of the same mind as to the cause. It is administrative anarchy. The cabinet ministers, who change frequently and do not hold the same views as to military matters, are not the masters in their own departments, where heads of bureaus often thwart one another and the minister too, while the prevailing confusion is rendered still greater by Parliament taking a hand in the affair. So the nation, which is always so ready to foot the bill for military defence, finds when a cloud appears on the international horizon that it has simply been robbed.

Yet it would seem that in this matter of armament the present *régime* should aim, by means of an improved technical and administrative policy, to counterbalance the effects of another French national infirmity for which this same *régime* is perhaps partly responsible. I refer to the depopulation of the country, one of the misfortunes of France since it has attained to its present proportions and which all competent persons agree in attributing to

the weakening of our moral and religious ideas, rather than to a falling-off in material well-being. There can be no doubt that the separation of Church and State is partly responsible for depopulation in France. A Government commission appointed to study this question of depopulation suddenly closed its labors when it found that its report would turn to the discredit of the *régime*. From a military point of view depopulation has as its inevitable result a diminution of the number of soldiers, so that to the sixty-five millions of inhabitants whom Germany counts to-day France can oppose but forty millions. As everybody is now practically a soldier in the two countries, Germany can put in the field three men to every two from France. There is all the more reason, therefore, why these two soldiers should be better prepared and trained than the three rival soldiers. But the imperfections of our political *régime* reacting on our military administration makes this impossible.

To the numerical feebleness of the army must be added its moral feebleness due to the dissensions springing from politics. It will be remembered that when General André was Minister of War he made secret inquiries into the religious and political beliefs of the officers. This act, which was severely condemned at the time, was more a manifestation of the moral feebleness just mentioned than its cause. It could not have flourished if the soil had not already been prepared for it. However much the army may strive to hold itself aloof from the politics of the nation, it cannot shut itself off completely from the quarrels raging around it, and these discords are sure to find their way into the barracks. The consequence is that the French army, like the nation, is divided against itself. Furthermore, there is going on throughout the country—the Government's tolerance of this campaign almost approaches to complicity in it—not only an anti-military propaganda, but an organized attack on the idea of patriotism, the effect of which is to weaken the sentiment of duty not only in the soldier and the reserves, but even in the lads soon to enter the army; for it is an admitted and astounding fact that this anti-national propaganda is carried on in the public schools; otherwise it might be attributed to certain arrogant and misled scribblers, to some pseudo-philosophers or even to foreign machinations. But coming from the official educators of the nation, it must be regarded as a sort of madness with which Jupiter

has inflicted the French people in order to precipitate it to its ruin.

When we seek the causes of the discomfitures and checks which, one after another, have befallen the international policy of France, we are forced to attribute them to the *ensemble* of reasons given above, whose effects, it should be noted, go on increasing rather than diminishing. Furthermore, an impartial observer is forced to recognize the fact that there is a direct connection between this *ensemble* of causes and the republican *régime* as it is understood and practised in France, where, it would seem, nobody wishes to understand it or practise it in any other way. When a people with a logical mind perceives this fact, practical thoughts and conclusions naturally follow. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that many Frenchmen have been led to ask themselves whether the nation acted wisely in adopting the republican form of government, unless we were also decided to abandon our rank as a great Power and the rôle which pertains thereto. But even among those who believe that a mistake was made very few would favor a change of *régime*; they are rather disposed to be logical in another direction and resign themselves to the idea that France has abandoned the part and the duties of a great Power. The republican leaders led off in this direction by the renunciation of the revenge against Germany which had been kept alive in France since the war of 1870. So completely has the republican party changed its policy in this matter that the inhabitants of Alsace-Lorraine, now clearly perceiving what the future has in store for them, are at present concerned only how best to arrange matters so as to live under these new conditions, which they consider final. Then, having turned their backs on this patriotic idea, these leaders adopt an ever-increasing attitude of reserve and inaction. This is their way of being logical, and it must be admitted that the vast majority of the nation accepts their view.

Most of those Frenchmen—there are still some of this sort left—who will not accept these logical consequences turn towards the example of the United States for comfort and ask why republican France may not make as much out of its *régime*, as regards both home and foreign affairs, as does the great Republic across the sea with its constitution of 1789. I only wish I could say that they are right and encourage them to continue on this line of reasoning. But unfortunately I cannot do so, for I brought

back with me from my sojourn in the United States the double impression which follows—viz., in the first place, I now see that Frenchmen are often mistaken concerning things political in America, and in the second place the home and foreign politics of the two countries are so different that there is no resemblance between them. And right here I would ask my American readers to be indulgent, which I am sure will be the case, for I am going to say more good than bad of their country, and particularly more good of they themselves than of their institutions.

As regards political and administrative matters, and especially as regards the working of the institutions of the country, I am thoroughly convinced that republican France has nothing to learn from the other side of the Atlantic. I feel perfectly sure that there is more political order and better administration in France than in America and also less corruption among the politicians. The reason for this is not hard to find. From a long practice, extending over several centuries, the machinery of Government has naturally reached a high state of perfection in France, which, of course, could not be the case in a country like the United States, where everything is young and in a perpetual state of formation. Again, in America the best in the nation does not, as a rule, go into public life; politics—at least until very recently—is rather an avocation than a serious business. Yet I think that the American people is in a healthier state than the French people, and this for two reasons. Firstly, in America the State meddles less than in France with the citizens' private interests and so has a weaker hold on national life; individual initiative does well where politics does badly. Secondly, the American people possesses an *ensemble* of good qualities which makes a healthy reaction easier.

Of all these good qualities which I find in the United States the most precious is that Anglo-Saxon spirit which has retained its empire over the nation, though this nation is now composed of elements which are very varied when viewed from an ethnographical standpoint. When applied to politics the Anglo-Saxon spirit is much superior to the Latin spirit, though the latter possesses certain other qualities which the former lacks. Nor should it be forgotten that the American people is always being rejuvenated by emigration, which has made it possible for the nation to preserve a freshness and vigor that an over-civilized and somewhat superannuated people cannot hope to have. And,

finally, the American State is not laboring, as is the French State, to weaken the foundation of morality by destroying religion, and as all sects are treated in the same friendly spirit on your side of the Atlantic there still exists in American life a moral brake which is disappearing from French life. One may say, therefore, that all that is worth anything in America is due to individuals and to the strength of the reaction which they oppose to the evils emanating from the political institutions of the country. At least this is the way the United States appear to me.

In matters of diplomacy—that is to say, in everything pertaining to foreign affairs—it is still more difficult to establish a comparison between France and the United States. Bearing in mind what I have said above concerning France and also the geographical situation of the American continent, it would be necessary, in order to institute a real assimilation between the two nations, that in the first place the United States, which has eighty millions of inhabitants, should have as neighbors, instead of Canada, which has six millions, and Mexico, which has eight, a Power with one hundred millions, corresponding to Germany, two others with eighty millions each, corresponding to England and Italy, and a fourth with forty corresponding to Spain. The splendid geographical isolation of the United States is, therefore, the essential difference between her and France. It would be necessary, furthermore, that the neighboring Powers be monarchical and military in the European sense of the word, and the United States, while remaining republican, should have this same military organization—that is, not a regular paid army, but “the armed nation” type of military establishment, which is quite a different thing. Still further, all Americans should not accept the existing form of Government, and the Federal Government should be in constant fear of endangering the life of the Constitution if called upon to defend with arms the honor or interests of the country. And, finally, the American people, like the French people, would have to be always conscious of a great military defeat whose memory rendered them timid. All these things would be necessary in order that the French Republic could be compared to the American Republic. But as this is not the case any such comparison is useless and misleading.

ALCIDE EBRAÏ.